

## Remembering one of the pioneers of South Devon's railway preservation movement

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*Written by Conrad Sutcliffe*

A steam-whistle salute was blown at full blast last week as a mark of respect prior to the funeral of one of the pioneers of the railway preservation movement in South Devon.

Bob Hill, a former sports editor of the Herald Express, died recently at the age of 81. His funeral took place last Wednesday (September 29) at noon in the church of St Mary the Virgin in Churston Ferrers.

The church is just a short shunt away from the old Churston to Brixham railway line, which closed in 1963, and close to the station at nearby Churston operated by the Dartmouth Steam Railway.

Bob worked on a number of preservation lines as a fireman and later a driver. When bosses at the Dartmouth Steam Railway learned of his death they wanted to contribute to his send-off.

Dick Wood, who worked with Bob on both the Dartmouth Steam Railway and later at the Buckfastleigh-based South Devon Railway, said a happy co-incidence will make it possible to give his old friend a steam

salute.

"A passing steam train is going through Churston around midday and John Jones, the managing director at DSR has agreed the loco will sound a long blow of the whistle as a mark of respect for Bob," said Mr Wood.

"It will be a timely and fitting tribute to Bob's railway service and I am sure Bob would have been touched by the gesture."

Bob Hill was a journalist with the long-defunct Paignton Observer and Herald Express for more half a century and sports editor of the latter for 25 years.

Although he had a passion for Chelsea FC, Bob's real love was for railways and in particular the days of steam.

Newsroom colleagues at the Herald Express will testify to Bob's seemingly encyclopaedic knowledge of train timetables, locomotives old and older and the people who worked on the Permanent Way.

Felicity Wilkes, Bob's sister, said her brother's passion for all things railway started at an early age.

"While he was still at school he and friend became interested in train spotting and went all over the place collecting engine numbers," said Felicity.

"On one occasion, probably to our parents' horror, Bob and his friend rode their bikes down to Plymouth and back to spot trains.

"When our parents had a hotel they closed it in the winter and Bob would set up a huge Hornby train set in the dining room. If I ever went near it I would be chased out of the room before I had the chance to step on anything."

When the railway preservation movement started in the mid-1960s in the wake of the Beeching Report which resulting in the closure of many unviable branch lines, Bob was one of the first enthusiasts to sign-up.

"When the South Devon Railway Association was formed Bob was member number nine," said friend and fellow steam enthusiast Bryan Gibson.

"He was involved when the first locos and coaches were moved from Exeter to Totnes and on to Buckfastleigh at the start of the preservation era in 1965.

"Fifty years later he was part of the celebrations at Buckfastleigh Station marking the anniversary of the first train movement on the Dart Valley Line."

Phil Hawke, a member of the Great Western Railway Society in the 1960s and 1970s, said Bob's impatience to work on trains could get the better of him at times and on one occasion with hilarious results.

“He used to tell the tale about recovering vacuum cylinders from condemned coaches at Exminster,” said Mr Hawke.

“Permission had been requested from British Railways but it was a long time in coming so Bob and Tony Rouse went there one night and took what they needed.

“A few days later an official letter arrived to the effect that permission was granted and an inspector would be sent along to supervise.

“Another rapid trip to Exminster followed to put the vacuum cylinders back so they could be taken off again with official blessing.”

Bob spent as much time out of the Herald Express newsroom as he could working on preservation lines. From 1969 until 1977 he travelled down to Bodmin General where he was the nominated depot supervisor.

When the Paignton-to-Kingswear preservation line was first mooted in the early 1970s, Bob became involved there too.

Mr Wood, who became involved at around the same time, said: Bob was a fireman first on both the Dart Valley Railway at Torbay and Buckfastleigh from the 1970s. At the time the two lines were operated as a joint venture.

“Bob became a driver in time on the SDR in the 1990’s when we took over the Buckfastleigh line.

“He became a ‘shed & shunt’ driver in his later years and didn’t go down the line on passenger trains any more, preferring the less strenuous duties as he grew older.”

Richard Elliott, who was general manager on the South Devon Railway from 1991-2009, said one of Bob’s more unusual jobs on the line was to drive a train that appeared in the 2003 film Churchill: the Hollywood Years.

“He had to hide out of sight while Christian Slater, the star of the film, appeared to be driving,” said Mr Elliott.

Sister Felicity said her brother brought home the star’s autograph. “My daughter was delighted,” she said.

Mr Elliott said firing a steam engine is hot, sweaty work – and Bob adored doing it.

“Whether it was a hot day or otherwise, Bob always used to be lathered when firing steam engines, but always came up with a smile on his face regardless,” said Mr Elliott.